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SUBJECT: GUJARAT: PEACEFUL ON THE SURFACE, YET STATE GOVERNMENT CONTINUES ITS POLICIES OF COMMUNALIZATION

Summary

1. (SBU) The riots of 2002 belong to history, and communal harmony now reigns in Gujarat, business leaders and the state's Chief Secretary told the Consul General during his September 8-9 visit to Ahmedabad. The Chief Secretary criticized the USG for continuing to probe into the judicial aftermath of the riots, and directly admonished the CG for meeting with human rights NGOs who he said failed to portray an accurate picture of Gujarat. NGO reps confirmed that the state was peaceful, but they said the GOG maintained a discrete, yet systematic policy of isolating and marginalizing the state's Muslim minority. Interlocutors from across civil society claimed the GOG was continuing to communalize many aspects of public life. Communalization of education was an example cited often. In reaction, Muslims were withdrawing from public schools and Muslim education was experiencing a "blossoming" in the form of new and even modern madrassas, the CG was told.

2. (SBU) Christian leaders told the CG that groups close to the RSS were planning a massive Hindu gathering in a remote tribal district early next year as part of an effort to bring Christian converts back into the Hindu fold. The general secretary of SEWA, a large and well-respected union and self-help organization for poor women, claimed that the GOG was hoping to use the group's reach and extensive membership as a conduit to disseminate communal ideologies. SEWA was resisting fiercely, the CG was told, and feeling the wrath of the GOG as a result. The local press expressed some interest in the USG decision to revoke the visa of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, but the CG's other interlocutors hardly broached the issue. Modi's troubles with rebels in his own party was also not a topic on most people's minds, and those who did mention the issue felt that Modi's opponents were too weak to topple him. Modi declined a request to meet with the CG, citing a scheduling conflict. End Summary.

Human Rights Activists: Most Gujaratis Have Forgotten

3. (SBU) Kirtee Shah, a well-known human rights activist and architect in Ahmedabad, wasn't surprised when the Consul General told him that government and business leaders were claiming that the 2002 riots now belonged to history. About 8 in 10 Gujaratis had forgotten about 2002, Shah said. "Who are these people who say everything has returned to normal?" he asked. "It is Gujarat's business community, which will always be interested in normalcy. It is also the state's political establishment, which will never accept guilt or responsibility." But most importantly, Shah said, it was the Hindu majority that saw no need to reflect on 2002, and that felt neither remorse nor regret. Shah said Ahmedabad, with its long history of communal flare ups, had a "dual character." When riots break out, things get very bloody. "But three months later everything is back to normal." Outsiders found it difficult to understand how people could forget such bloodshed so quickly. Only a small number of Gujaratis and some NGOs were truly interested in broader issues of human rights and justice. Because the vast majority wanted to forget, NGOs were easily branded as "5 star NGOs" that survived on foreign funding and were bent on maligning Gujaratis and the state's "good name" to ensure that donations kept flowing, Shah said.

4. (SBU) Father Cedric Prakash of the Prashant Center for Human Rights and Justice said the Hindu majority and the political leadership not only wanted to forget, but had to as well. Otherwise, "the consequences would be too terrible. Large parts of the state's political leadership and too many citizens would be held accountable" for the atrocities against the Muslim minority, Prakash said.

5. (SBU) While the majority looked ahead, the riots and the lack of justice remained on the minds of the state's Muslim minority, the CG heard repeatedly. Gujarati Muslims had lost all faith in the ability and readiness of the system to bring justice, said Dr. Shakeel Ahmad of the Forum for Democracy and Communal Amity. Shah echoed Ahmad's thoughts. "It took 21 years for the central government to acknowledge the wrongdoings against Sikhs in 1984," Shah said in reference to the riots that followed the assassination of PM Indira Gandhi. "Muslims are asking themselves how long they'll have to wait for justice in Gujarat, especially when Chief Minister Modi remains in power." Congress

politician Arjun Modhwadia, opposition leader in the Gujarat parliament, said only a few of the several thousand cases pending would ever lead to a conviction. The BJP government was actively torpedoing the justice system; many witnesses were abysmally poor people who could be bought off cheaply, he said.

16. (SBU) The CG's NGO interlocutors acknowledged that anti-Muslim resentments had long existed within the Hindu majority in Gujarat. However, the current government was unique for actively using these resentments as part of a communal-based policy, Hussein Jowher of the NGO Sprat told the CG. Jowher said anti-Muslim feelings would never have led to the scale of bloodshed seen in 2002 without the active encouragement of the state government. The use of communalism continued until the present, although the state government had become far more discreet in using it to further its political objectives. On the surface the state government attempted to project a picture of communal harmony by sponsoring large-scale, visible events around some of the state's major holidays, Jowher said.

The GOG View: A State of Communal Harmony...

17. (SBU) In his meeting with the CG, Gujarat Chief Secretary Sudhir Mankad painted a picture of an economically vibrant, peaceful state living in communal harmony. Mankad explained at length the GOG's plans to support events around certain holidays, and cited the success of such events as evidence of good communal relations in the state. (Note: Citing unavailability, Chief Minister Modi denied a request for a meeting, as did the leadership of the state's economic promotion board. End note). After an extended discussion on the economic situation in Gujarat (septel), the CG asked Mankad what the state government was doing to address the injustices of 2002. Mankad said the riots were a closed issue. The culprits were being tried in "special courts" (the Chief Secretary did not specify which courts he meant). A significant number had been prosecuted and received jail sentences. Gujarat had moved on, Mankad added. The state was now peaceful, and the crime rate was lower than India's national average or, for that matter, lower than in the U.S., he claimed.

...But Don't Ask Us About The 2002 Riots

18. (SBU) When the CG asked for specifics on the number of convictions, Mankad lost his patience. He asked the CG why the U.S. was "so obsessed" with the riots. "You always express concern about the riots, but look what else is happening in the world," Mankad complained. The GOG was just as concerned about human rights in Gujarat as anyone else, but it was not a government's concern, or business, to inquire about the human rights situation elsewhere. Reps of other diplomatic missions visited Gujarat to discuss the economy, education or cultural issues. The U.S. was always different. "When I saw your schedule I asked myself why you need to talk to all these groups", he said, referring to the CG's NGO interlocutors. "I would like to express the concern of my government that you are meeting with such people." D. Rajagopalan of the state's department of industries and mines, who joined Mankad in the meeting, told the CG: "You should get a feeling for the state of Gujarat before you meet with these extreme people." The CG underlined the importance the USG attached to human rights, and said we would continue to follow this issue closely. He asked Mankad for data on the number of convictions related to the 2002 riots. The Chief Secretary promised to provide the data. (Comment: At the time of this writing Consulate had yet to receive anything from the GOG. We honestly don't expect the Chief Secretary to follow up on his promise since the 2002 riots are not an issue that the Gujarat establishment enjoys addressing. End comment.)

Business Leaders: Life is Normal, Business is Good

19. (SBU) In several meetings with business leaders, everyone touted the commercial climate in Gujarat but did not mention the 2002 riots until the CG brought up the issue. Gujarat had returned to normal, the CG heard. Gujaratis were pragmatic, peace loving people, and the riots were an aberration. Several interlocutors said most Gujaratis were surprised when the USG revoked CM Modi's visa. The USG's motivation for doing so was not immediately clear to most people, Sunil Parekh, an advisor for the rating agency Crisil told the CG. Gujaratis were initially angry with the USG, but most people, including Modi himself, quickly decided that the visa issue would not affect Gujarat's relations with the U.S., Parekh said.

BJP Rebels, Visa Revocation Both Non-Issues

10. (SBU) Congress politician Modhwadia also praised the USG for revoking Modi's visa, but acknowledged that the issue was not on most people's minds. In state politics, the top issues were power outages in rural areas, price inflation, crime and corruption, he said. The CG's interlocutors hardly mentioned CM

Modi's struggles with his inner-party opposition. Modhwadia told the CG that the rebels were not strong enough to topple Modi, and would probably not gain enough backing in any case. Shah echoed Modhwadia's views, adding that the national BJP leadership was desperate to hold onto Modi because his leadership in Gujarat was one of the few success stories that the battered party could demonstrate in India.

HR Groups: GOG Continues to Marginalize, Isolate Muslims

11. (SBU) Echoing statements we had heard in earlier visits, spokesmen from human rights NGOs and Muslim groups described what they said was the state's discreet yet active isolation of Gujarati Muslims. Hussein Jowher said Ahmedabad's Muslims were being marginalized into four separate, unconnected pockets of the city either out of fear for their safety or because buying or renting a home elsewhere had become virtually impossible. In one such case, no single public college, post office or other public building serviced a pocket of 400,000 Muslims in Juhapura in Ahmedabad, he claimed. Jowher said the GOG closed the facilities during the mid-eighties after a riot and never reopened them.

Communalization of Education Continues As Well

12. (SBU) Both Prakash and Ahmad said the state continued to propagate communalism in the state's schools. Catholic Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes also said that Hindutva themes were making stronger inroads into the official school curricula. The church faced a dilemma, as it was required to implement state guidelines in its curricula, he said. When discussing the growing communalism of education with well-meaning civil servants in the state's education bureaucracy, Fernandes said, he was told: "be patient, Father, all of this will pass one day," implying that things could change if the Modi government ever lost power. Such assurances were not comforting, Fernandes said, since communal education was also influencing future thinking in the state by targeting today's youth. A similar development was observable in Gujarat's court system, he said, where communal thinking had also seriously affected how judges think. Such thinking would not disappear quickly should Modi leave office, he said.

The Reaction: The "Blossoming" of Madrassas

13. (SBU) Fernandes said increasing numbers of Muslim families were sending their children to Christian schools to escape the communalization of education. NGOs reps also described the dilemmas facing Muslim parents in Gujarat. Many families had withdrawn their children from public schools because of increased communalization of education, Shakeel Ahmed told the CG. Other families whose children had to traverse non-Muslim neighborhoods to reach school had also withdrawn their children out of safety concerns, Jowher added. In addition, many families could not afford to send their children to school. New Madrassas were openly rapidly to address the educational needs of the Muslim population, Shakeel and Jowher said. Ahmad spoke of a "blossoming" of Muslim education in madrassas. A madrassa was easy and inexpensive to open. Schools were more expensive, more red tape was involved, and many Muslim neighborhoods did not have a critical mass of students to support a school, he added.

14. (SBU) Jowher cautioned against interpreting the growth of madrassas as a sign of increased communalism or fundamentalism on the part of Gujarati Muslims. Most Gujarati Muslims realized that secularism benefited them. They knew they would always be losers in a communal India because they were a minority. Muslim parents wanted religion to be part of their children's education, but they also wanted schooling that prepared their children for the demands of modern working life. Madrassas were adapting to such expectations, with some "modern" madrassas also teaching contemporary subjects and even computer skills. Nonetheless, most Muslim parents would prefer that their children attend normal schools. Children don't learn English in most madrassas, and a madrassa education will not qualify children for college, Jowher said.

Freedom of Religion Act Yet To Be Implemented

15. (SBU) Archbishop Fernandes said the GOG had yet to implement the so-called Freedom of Religion Act of 2003, which would have required local state officials to approve any religious conversion. The GOG was not interfering in his church's conversion activities. He added, however, that the church was being cautious to avoid any confrontation with the state. Fernandes said pentecostal Christian groups were "more vocal" in their conversion activities and were giving his church a "bad name." Father Prakesh said local officials were invoking the act to intimidate people in tribal areas who wanted to convert. Some officials had warned potential converts to Christianity that they might not be able to register conversions because of the ambiguities surrounding the implementation of the law,

Prakash claimed.

16. (SBU) Both Fernandes and Prakesh told the CG that organizations affiliated with the RSS were planning a massive Hindu gathering in February 2006 to the Dangs district, a remote tribal area in southeastern Gujarat. (Note: In 1998 attacks on Christian churches and missionary schools in the Dangs attracted international attention. End note) Prakash said the RSS groups aimed to "Hindu-ize" the tribal populations in the district, many of whom were Christians. Prakash said the planned action was part of a sustained campaign called "ghar wapsi" that aimed to bring tribals in central India back to the Hindu fold. Subsequent to the CG's meeting with the Christian clerics, the media has reported that the GOG was supporting the RSS groups' plans for the gathering over the objections of the local tribal residents.

GOG Targeting Well-Respected Women's Group?

17. (SBU) The CG visited the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a highly respected trade union and self-help organization with over 500,000 members throughout Gujarat. Reemaben Nanawati, SEWA General Secretary, told the CG that any communal harmony projected by political leaders was only superficial. The GOG was trying to project normality, but politically the government was using communal animosities to "divide and rule" the state's many communal, caste and tribal groups. The state government was obstructing the activities of SEWA in the remote area of Kutchch in northwestern Gujarat, Nanawati said. The GOG was withholding grants for state projects being implemented by SEWA in the region, she said, ostensibly over financial irregularities. In reality, the GOG was interested in using SEWA's reach and vast membership as a conduit for its communal ideologies, Nanawati claimed. SEWA was resisting fiercely, since communal harmony among its members was an important factor for its success, she said. The resistance was making the GOG more vindictive and causing it to step up its pressure on the organization, she added. Due to lack of funds over 12,000 extremely poor SEWA members have not received wages for over five months, Nanawati claimed.

Comment

18. (SBU) "Dual character" aptly describes the mood in Gujarat. Most of our interlocutors from the Hindu majority appear to be sincere in their views that the 2002 riots belong to history. They have moved on with their lives, and normally do not mention 2002 until we bring up the subject. One interlocutor's comment that most Gujaratis did not immediately understand the USG motivation for revoking CM Modi's visa shows how far removed the events of 2002 are from many people's daily concerns. At the same time, the bloodshed of 2002 appears to be very much alive in the back of people's minds, otherwise it would be hard to explain why the GOG goes to such length to promote festivals that are aimed at documenting communal harmony in the state. The Chief Secretary's emotional reaction to the CG's inquiries on the subject also shows just how raw nerves can be whenever 2002 is mentioned. And however much the majority wants to forget, the remaining bitterness among the sizable Muslim minority and outspoken human rights NGOs will ensure that the riots will continue to play a role in the political life of Gujarat.

19. (SBU) As alive as emotions may be under the surface, none of the CG's interlocutors expected communal tensions in Gujarat to flare up any time soon. CG Modi may have actively fanned communal tensions in 2002, but today he no doubt shares the view that any repeat of the 2002 bloodshed would be detrimental to his political fortunes, both within Gujarat and outside the state as well. In fact, contacts in Gujarat have long told us that the police have strict instructions from the political leadership to nip any communal violence in the bud. In the longer term, however, the state government's clearly visible attempts to marginalize the Muslim minority and its discreet attempts to further communalize public life can only increase the risk of heightened tensions and renewed bloodshed in a state with a history of communal rioting. End comment.

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